Afghanistan.





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Preface

Afghanistan is a fascinating country full of contrast, with steep mountain ranges, endless desert landscape, fertile oases and idyllic river valleys where, due to the century old irrigation systems, almost anything can be grown. Winters are snowbound and ice cold, the summer boiling hot. People here have adapted to extremes and they emanate a unique pride and dignity which is etched into their prominent features.

German Agro Action first began work in Afghanistan in 1980, just after the Soviet invasion, when we supported a project to help Afghan refugees in Pakistan. In 1993, while Mujahideen factions waged war against each other, we significantly increased our support for the crisis-ridden Afghan people. Afghanistan became one of the priority countries in our humanitarian and development aid programme. Even during the reign of the merciless Taliban regime we didn't abandon the country or its people.

This brochure describes the path which the country has already taken and is on the point of continuing today: from the appalling refugee crisis and the brutal violence of war, to people returning to their homes, resettlement and the bitter struggle for survival, to the process of development, self-determination and the rule of law. At the beginning of 2004, after heated debate and tough negotiations, Afghanistan was finally able to establish a constitution. It is a compromise between the conservatives, Islamicists and the liberal, more western-orientated groups in Afghanistan. In 2004 the first presidential and parliamentary elections will also take place. Afghanistan is standing at an historic crossroads.

Now new tasks lie ahead. Rebuilding the country, especially outside the cities, has to be achieved through the Afghan people, so that their living standard increases and their dependence on opium cultivation as a principal source of income can come to end.

Our work for the Afghan people during all the years would not have been possible without the generous support of a great number of donor agencies who continued to encourage and finance our projects even under the most difficult conditions. First and foremost the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the German Foreign Office (AA) and the German Embassy in Kabul have to be mentioned as longstanding partners. Likewise the European Union (Aidco) and ECHO backed our committment throughout the years. The United Nations, represented through FAO, the WFP, and others, were equally reliable supporters. More recently new partnerships with the International Office for Migration (IOM), the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB)developed. Cooperation with "Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit" (GTZ) and German Development Service (DED) was renewed from 2002 onwards and bears fruits in innovative project approaches.

In the last three years our project work has seen an important development. Under the Taliban, cooperation with local authorities and direct contact to the civilian populace was hazardous. As a result we were unable either to initiate, take up and/or support social development projects. But now we're collaborating closely with Afghan authorities and leaders at all levels, offering the transfer of knowledge and accompanying parts of the Afghan civil society in the processes of change.

Many people have supported and worked with us all these years in and outside of Afghanistan. Without them German Agro Action couldn't have been able to stand by its Afghan friends so effec-tively. We would like to dedicate this brochure primarily to our Afghan colleagues who, in spite of the dangers posed by the warlords and the Taliban, are unwavering in their pursuit of our common goal - that of helping the needy civil population in Afghanistan.

Hubertus Rüffer
Programme Manager
Afghanistan (until 2003)

Renate Becker
Regional Head
Central Asia

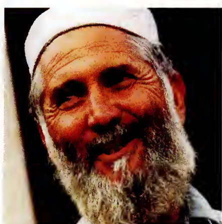
Content















Samia looks to the future optimistically, although a woman's unveiled face still isn't a common sight in Afghanistan.

In the garden of freedom

How the long neglected Women Park in Kabul has become a popular meeting place again, and English courses are opening new windows of opportunity for women.



Afghan children had to do without playgrounds for a long time.

For Samia it's like going back to her own childhood. "I used to spend a lot of time with my mother here," she says. "It was a beautiful place, with tall trees and lots of playground rides." But Kabul lost a lot of its beauty over the long years of war. The Women Park, which Samia is talking about so enthusiastically, was also not spared.

This communal place, where Kabul's women were able to relax on their own or play with their children, has existed since the time of the monarchy. Located in the old district of Sharara, it soon bore the burden of war. As fighting raged and essentials were scarce, its old trees were used for firewood, and the playground rides went to ruin. When the war was finally over, the city fell under Taliban control, and women were banned from public life. They were no longer allowed to work, and as soon as they stepped out of their home, they had to wear the burqa – a mobile, textile prison from head to foot. They were even denied medical services. And, of course, the Women Park was closed down.

Samia spent this bleak period as a refugee in Pakistan. When she came back to her city and her park, she was both overjoyed at her homecoming and distraught by what she saw in the long neglected Women Park. "Everything was completely destroyed – no grass, no flowers, no trees," she recounts. Now it's been two years since the Taliban were driven out and things are looking brighter. "The place is green again, thanks to our twelve women gardeners". These gardeners, who replanted the 2.5 hectares of ground and tend to it daily, are paid through German Agro Action's Small Project Fund. This fund also paid for the park benches on which the women can take a break from the hustle and bustle in the city. Seesaws and swings have also been rebuilt, a magnet for children who persuade their mothers to visit the park.



Samia plants roses. Women gardeners have their work cut out reviving the former botanical splendour of the women's garden.

all photographs: Cordula Kropke



Reading is fun – if you can. After years of strict educational and vocational prohibition for girls and women under the Taliban, no opportunity is passed up.





all photographs: Cordula Kropke

Specific support for women and girls is an important aspect of German Agro Action's agenda. Female illiteracy was around 85% at the end of the Taliban period.

Every week day 40 to 50 women come to spend time behind the high walls of Bagh-e-Zanana, the Women Park. "At the weekend the park is full, and women come from all over the city," says Samia. They take a break beneath the wide canopies, as the newly planted fruit and almond trees are still too small to provide shade. Now and again a mobile phone rings or a child cries out. Otherwise there's nothing but peaceful tranquillity here. The women who come here in a burqa – still a large percentage of women, even in the capital – throw them back as soon as they come through the gates. "It's even better here than it was before," claims Samia. "There's no entrance fee, and we offer courses for women and girls. They can sew here and learn English in an informal atmosphere and without being disturbed."

Knowledge is power

English – for many it's the first step towards a better future, a lifeline that might help them find a job for their fulfilment and independence. In a language school in the residential district of the Mongolian-descendants, the Hazaras, in Kabul, German Agro Action is therefore also supporting English and computer courses for young women. Teaching takes place every morning from eight to nine o'clock, and at the end of the course they receive a certificate. 19 year-old Karima has been coming here for six months, and once the morning classes are over, she goes to school. She's the only member of her family of eight who's learning English, and she wants to pass on what she's learnt later in life. "I want to become a teacher," says Karima. After years of war and repression under the Taliban, women in Afghanistan might now finally have a chance.

My house is my castle

A roof overhead means the beginning of a new life.



The tough years as a refugee have not embittered him. Abdul Shukur admires his newfound, humble prosperity with pride and pleasure.

Abdul Shukur wedges his chewing tobacco under his upper lip, raises his chin proudly and nods mischievously to the corner of the room where some precious object lays hidden underneath a cloth. Eventually he unravels the veiled wonder. "TV," he says, and "video", and with that his English vocabulary is completely exhausted. On the shelf in his living room there's a solitary Indian video cassette, and one has the feeling he's dying to turn on his generator – co-financed with his neighbour – to play the film in honour of the occasion. Up until two years ago Abdul Shukur had been living in terrible conditions as a refugee in Pakistan, at times in a tent, occasionally in a hut, for a total of fourteen years. But now he's doing well. He's back home on his family plot in the village of Narjbagh near Jalalabad, and he's the proud owner of a television and video recorder. But most important of all, and the basis for all the new fineries, he has a house. His house is his castle.

His private fortress is surrounded by a 5-meter high mud wall which towers towards the sky. This is commonplace in Pashtun country. When he returned from Pakistan, there wasn't much left of what once lay sheltered behind those walls. The rooms had been burned to the ground, the stables were falling apart. The place was uninhabitable, alien and cold. The neighbours had fared the same. The bedrock of their lives was in ruins. But now Abdul Shukur's garden is blooming again, thanks to the support he received from German Agro Action to help him rebuild his three-roomed house. So, too, did fifteen other families in the village. Still hanging prominently above the front gate is a blue sign with three key letters on it: "GAA".

The support Abdul Shukur received to rebuild his home was the impetus to a new life. Aged fifty but old before his time, Abdul Shukur is full of plans to improve his house, furnish it and maybe even expand it sometime. He's now found a job with a local authority in town. He's earning a living and can afford the odd thing. His children go to school, and he doesn't tire of praising the government for making education available to girls. "We had nothing. We didn't even have any spirit left in us," he says. "That spirit's slowly coming back." The children should have a good education. They should go on to further education if they want, but Abdul Shukur hopes that in the end they'll work in agriculture, "so they'll always have something to eat". The time as a refugee has left its marks.

According to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) there are still 2.5 million Afghans living over the border in Pakistan and Iran. "They want to come back, but they're waiting until thing's are safer here and there are more jobs," explains Abdul Shukur. On the one hand he's delighted that "the whole world is doing something for us," but he also wants Afghans to "get into gear and rebuild their country – with their own sweat – so that someday we won't have to beg anymore".

Nothing without sweat

The house building programme run by German Agro Action is aimed primarily at returning refugees, but it doesn't mean those supported by it don't have to sweat themselves. As a rule the programme supplies a building plan and materials, but the construction itself has to be undertaken by the recipient. An expenditure of around $1,600 puts a roof over their head. For these people it's the dawn of a better future, a start-up capital which is well worth it, as Abdul Shukur confirms. "The Afghans," he says before we go, "will never forget this."

The children of Kabul

In an orphanage and a day care centre for children, even the youngest are learning how to get by in this dangerous city.

Assad Ullah was one of the lucky ones, as far as anyone can be lucky in Afghanistan: he's got a roof over his head, regular meals and he attends school. Assad Ullah is ten, and he lives in an orphanage in the northern district of Tahia Maskan in north Kabul. Yet he's not an orphan. His mother gave him away. She comes to visit him every Thursday, but as a widow with eleven children, she was out of her depth with worries, and so she looked for somewhere to take in little Assad. Perhaps he's here because he's the most gifted of her children: open-minded, friendly and cheerful – he could have a bright future. "I really like school," he says. "I want to learn English and become a doctor."

850 boys live and study in this bulky stone building erected by the occupying Soviets as an orphanage. Assad Ullah shares his room with 23 other children: 12 bunk beds in $35m^2$. The ceiling is badly cracked, and the only piece of furniture is a small table, which the children squeeze around when it's time to do their homework. The two small windows are draped with tarpaulin to keep out the wind. It keeps out the daylight, too. There are no toys or personal belongings at all. There are rooms where 60 children sleep.

Mohammed Naeen Maqsodi, the director of the orphanage, knows there are flaws. "We need oil for the heaters, warm clothes and boots for the winter," he says. But he also knows that, without the support which the orphanage receives from various sources, everything would be much worse. The fact that the children at least get a warm meal every day is due to the new kitchen provided by German Agro Action.

Help for the orphanage was financed by the Small Projects Fund, set up through donations for Kabul. In 2003 its budget was 50,000 Euros. Single projects are sponsored with between 5,000 and 10,000 Euros. This means that German Agro Action's work, which is largely concentrated in the poverty stricken rural areas, is also evident in the capital. Above all women and children are prioritised for funding.

German Agro Action also provides lunchtime meals in a school for the deaf and has furnished rooms in a nursery in the Alaoddin psychiatric clinic, where 51 children play and learn together from morning to evening. This gives their mothers the opportunity to work in the clinic. They show us their collection of toys, neatly laid out on a table: a Barbie doll, a cuddly elk and other soft toys, as well as paintings and handicraft done by the children. Colourful posters adorn the walls, bathing their unscathed world in flowers, fruits and Mickey Mouse. Yet right next to them is a poster printed by the Afghan mine clearance organisation, Omar. An octopus' tentacles present the various types of mines which hold Afghanistan firmly in their grip. A child from Kabul also needs to know about things like this to survive in his country.

The children play surprisingly quietly and concentrated. They're almost spellbound by the puppet show given by their teachers. Paper mobiles dangle from the ceiling – doves of peace – and their yearning for peace is expressed in a poem they're learning:

> *"We are the children of this land,*
> *we are the flowers of this land.*
> *We love our country,*
> *and we love peace.*
> *Peace is our hope.*
> *We hate war."*

all photographs: Cordula Kropke





Afghan children have a right to peace. Those who grew up during the war were robbed of their childhood.

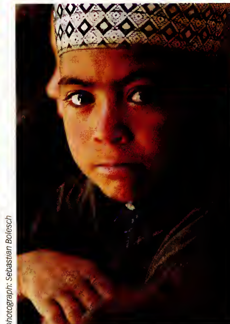
Afghanistan caught between the Great Powers

Time after time Afghanistan has been the wrestling ring and buffer of invading forces.



all other photographs: Cordula Kropke





photograph: Sebastian Bolesch



Foreign powers came and went leaving behind a racial mix in the Hindu Kush.

"Those who should hear, do hear no more,
for the entire army did die at war.
Of the thirteen thousand, nearly all were slain,
only one man came back from Afghanistan."

This poem by Theodor Fontane describes the devastating defeat of the British in 1842 in the first of three Anglo-Afghan wars. By then the myth of this staunch nation of warriors in the Hindu Kush, who have always defied foreign powers throughout its history, was already established. Yet over the centuries their history has witnessed fewer heroic victories. More often the country has been ravaged by conquering armies and troops passing through. Afghanistan's role in history has always been one of the victim – above all, the victim of its geography.

Time and again foreign powers passed through the country

For years Afghanistan has been a hub – or a buffer state – between Europe and Asia. Its territories were traversed by trade routes, like the famous Silk Route, and within its borders foreign empires were founded and destroyed. Already in the year 330 BC Alexander the Great passed through this land, then known as "Ariana", land of the Aryans, on his way to India. In 642 the Arabs came and converted the tribes to Islam. In the 13th Century Genghis Khan's hordes of horsemen wreaked havoc here and his successor, Timur the Lame, continued the raids. The Hazaras, who now constitute 15% of the Afghan population, are the settled descendants of the Mongols.

Today the largest ethnic group are the Pashtuns, mainly living just over the border from their brothers in Pakistan in the south, forming 40% of the Afghan population, followed by the Tajiks from the north (25%), the Shiite Hazaras, Usbeks and around two dozen other ethnic groups. Because of this ethnic mix, the formation of an Afghan nation has always been extremely problematic.

photograph: dpa



The famous Buddha statues in Bamian were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. They were destroyed by the Taliban in February 2001 despite huge international protest.





all photographs: dpa

King Amanullah: a family photo on a state visit to Germany with his wife Turaja on 22nd February 1928. His reforms – including the abolishment of the compulsory wearing of veils by women – were his downfall at the hands of the fundamental clergy.

In the middle of the 18th Century the Pashtun tribal leader, Ahmed Schah Durrani, proclaimed himself Emir and managed to bring almost the entire territory of today's Afghanistan under his control. However, this newly formed empire was put in jeopardy in the 19th Century by the so-called "Great Game", as Tsarist Russia and the British Empire struggled for power and influence in Central Asia. Afghanistan became the wrestling ring of these Great Powers.

In the bloody Anglo-Afghan wars – from 1838 to 1842, from 1878 to 1880, and again in 1919 – the British made three futile attempts to conquer the country. In the end they settled on using a neutral and partly-controlled Afghanistan as a buffer to protect their Indian crown colonies from the Russians who were expanding from the Caucasus. In 1919, however, they were ultimately forced to hand over complete independence to Afghanistan.

Relations to Germany were close

Neutrality beyond its borders and modernisation within were the core political issues of the subsequent sovereign period. In particular, close ties were made with Germany. In this period, with their mutual affiliation to the Indo-European language, an alleged Aryan brotherhood arose between the nations, which many in Afghanistan still believe in today. This is also the reason why Afghanistan's national airline today is called "Ariana".

The German-Afghan relationship began unofficially in 1916, when the emporor Kaiser Wilhelm II sent a secret delegation to Kabul. After an exhausting journey through the desert, they presented Emir Habibullah with an offer to form an alliance against the British. Nothing came of it, but in the 20s and 30s the relationship flourished, especially economically.



photograph: dpa

Muslim guerrilla fighters, under the leadership of Hekmatyar, in a tank plundered from the Red Army. The Russian invasion ended in bitter defeat.

Then the Germans moved into the Hindu Kush. They built dams, roads, electricity plants and schools. In 1924 the partly German-speaking Amani secondary school was founded, which still exists today, and it served as a centre of learning for the academic and political elite. The pinnacle of relations was in 1928 when King Amanullah visited Berlin. Tens of thousands of people cheered the exotic leader as he paraded the city with President Hindenburg in an open-top car. The press declared the king their darling. Even a short-lived song, "Amanullah, Amanullah", was dedicated to him.

After the collapse of the monarchy came the Red Army and civil war

As a result of his rapid rate of reform, King Amanullah found himself with ever fewer friends at home. In 1929 he was deposed and forced into exile in Switzerland. Reform slowed down under his later successor, King Zahir Shah, who ascended the throne in 1933, but Afghanistan remained an important beneficiary of German foreign aid. Zahir Shah's overthrow at the hands of his own cousin, Mohammed Daud Khan, ultimately marked the start of the political turmoil which continued until the invasion of Soviet troops at Christmas 1979 and ensued in 23 years of war.

As is so often the case, history repeated itself: Afghanistan soon became the wrestling ring of two Great Powers, this time the Soviet Union and USA, just as in the 19th Century. Later neighbouring states intervened to gain influence over its prevailing factions. Supported by American money and US-manufactured armaments, the Afghan resistance declared a jihad and managed to force the Soviet troops to retreat after ten years of bloody conflict. This defeat of Moscow was one of the factors which





all photographs: Cordula Kropke

Reminders of the 23 years of war are everywhere in Afghanistan. The war cost over a million Afghan lives. At 47, life expectancy here is by far the lowest in Asia, and the mortality rate is the second highest in the world. Around one in four children never reach the age of five.



photograph: dpa

Western dressed students at the University of Kabul in 1981.



photograph: Cordula Kropke

Women wearing the burqa in 2004: the veil falls slowly, even though compulsory wearing of the burqa was annulled after the fall of the Taliban.

precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union. What then followed in Afghanistan was, however, not the long hoped for peace, but a devastating civil war as fighting broke out amongst various Mujahideen groups who were partly influenced by foreign interests. Further sectors of the capital were destroyed, and the provinces fell under the control of various regional warlords.

A new authoritarian power, the strictly religious Taliban (meaning "students of the Koran") came onto the scene in 1994. Trained in the Pakistani refugee camps they took over the country from the south upwards – supported by the Pakistani secret services, who were looking for regional stability and influence in a Pashtun government. At first the USA also supported the Taliban in the hope of sealing an oil pipeline deal. Troops led by the one-eyed mullah, Mohammed Omar, from Kandahar in the south, marched into Kabul in 1996 and by 1998 had brought about 90% of the country under their control. They set up a stringent religious system which disregarded human rights, particularly women's rights.

The Taliban fell increasingly under the influence of the terrorist group, al-Qaeda, run by Osama Bin Laden, which lead to UN sanctions and the international isolation of Afghanistan. When the Taliban refused to extradite Bin Laden after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in New York and Washington, the conflict escalated to war. In less than two months the Taliban were driven from power by a USA-led anti-terror coalition.

The foundations for peace and reconstruction of Afghanistan were set at the end of 2001 at an international Afghanistan conference in Petersberg near Bonn. The charismatic Pashtun leader, Hamid Karsai, was installed as president of a multi-ethnic interim government. The UN sent an "International Security and Assistance Force" (ISAF), consisting of 5,000 soldiers, to Kabul to stabilise the country. In accordance with the old friendship, Germany provided a large part of the peacekeeping force. Other than planned, the relative stability secured by ISAF in the capital did not spread to the provinces. On the contrary, unrest in the provinces spilled over into the capital. This resulted in the extension of the UN mandate in autumn 2003 to a series of "ISAF islands" in the provinces, and the German forces moved to Kunduz in northern Afghanistan.

The military and civil process of stabilisation has proved to be far more difficult than planned. The work of the central government in Kabul is deterred by internal fighting amongst the factions and endeavours to gain independence amongst the regional leaders.

Refugees need prospects

The lack of jobs, housing and prospects also applies to the refugees who returned in unexpectedly high numbers. The country is devastated. War has left entire generations without an education.

Four to six million Afghans left their native country during the Soviet occupation, the subsequent civil war and the Taliban period. According to the UN's refugee aid agency (UNHCR), 2.5 million refugees returned home in the first two years after the war against terror. 1.8 million of them came from Pakistan alone, where more than three million Afghans had been living in exile. A share of the more than one million refugees living in Iran has also returned to Afghanistan.

The years of war have left Afghanistan with a legacy of up to ten million landmines. On average ten Afghans are killed or injured every day by mines, amongst them many children. According to experts, clearing the mines, even with the maximum effort, will take at least ten years. An additional problem are the litter bombs used by the USA in the war against terror. Thousands of unexploded projectiles are lying hidden in the ground, an ever present and deadly danger.

AFGHANISTAN		GERMANY
Islamic republic	**government**	Federal republic
652,225 km²	**total area**	357,025 km²
Kabul (2.14 million inhabitants in 2002), a rapid increase after the end of the war	**capital**	Berlin (3.39 million inhabitants)
28.72 million (estimated in July 2003)	**population**	82.53 million
37.4 inhabitants per km² (2002)	**population density**	231 inhabitants per km²
3.38% (estimated in 2003)	**population growth**	0.1% (estimated in 2002)
Women: 45.5 years, Men: 47.0 years	**life expectancy rate**	Women: 80 years, Men: 75 years (2002)
5.64 children per woman (estimated in 2003)	**birth rate**	1.3 children per woman (2002)
142.4 in 1000 live births	**infant mortality**	4.2 in 1000 live births
Men: 68.5%, Women: 85% (1999)	**illiteracy rate**	Under 1%
Dari (Persian), Pashto	**official languages**	German
99% Muslim, consisting of 84% Sunnis, 15% Shiites, small groups of Ismailis, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews	**Religion**	49% Protestant, 45% Catholic, 6% Muslim, Jewish and others
Opium (illegal), dried fruits, nuts, handwoven carpets, wool, fur, cotton, precious stones	**main export articles**	Cars, machinery, chemical products, generation and distribution of electricity
Food, luxury food, machines, transport equipment, manufactured products, fuels	**main import articles**	Cars, chemical products, machinery, oil and natural gas
ca. US$ 19 billion in 2002	**GNP**	ca. 2,129 billion in 2002
ca. 60 Afghan	**currency**	1 €



● **GAA offices**

Source: Munziger-Archiv 2004; CIA World Factbook 2003; Federal Statistical Office Germany 2004

Help between the fronts

Warmongers came and went, but Dr. Abdul Karim Mirsasade stood fast. He's been organising German Agro Action's humanitarian work in Mazar-e-Sharif since 1993.

He's seen them come and go, the warmongers and would-be rulers. He kept his head down when fighting escalated, but he never left his post. Dr. Abdul Mirsasade has been running German Agro Action's projects in northern Afghanistan from his regional office in Mazar-e-Sharif since 1993. They've been years full of political fluctuation and turmoil, but in the thick of the fighting over the distribution of power, Dr. Abdul Mirsasade just made sure he saw to the distribution of aid.

Northern Afghanistan is populated by Tajiks and Uzbeks, by Harazas, Turkmens and Pashtuns – more like a collecting tank than a melting pot. Ethnic lines keep becoming front lines, along which even nowadays warlords like the Uzbek general, Raschid Dostum, or the Tajik, Atta Mohammed, muster their troops. Hostilities are exacerbated by external influences from neighbouring states, and the region is a political minefield where everybody is fighting for their own interests. Yet Dr. Mirsasade has kept well clear of the military commanders – as far as he could. "We've always supported people in need," he says, "regardless of their ethnic origin or political leaning."

After studying in Karlsruhe and Halle

"I'm an Afghan," he declares, and with a Tajik father and a Pashtun mother, Dr. Mirsasade's neutrality may well be hereditary. Born in the province of Ghazni, he grew up in Kabul, where he graduated from the German-funded Amani school. It was there that he made his first connections to the West, though he went on to study Maths and Physics in his home country. In Karlsruhe, and later in Halle, he acquired the didactic expertise to return home to Kabul as a lecturer and member of staff of the Ministry of Education. He never lost his contacts, or his affinity to Germany, and this ultimately led to his appointment by German Agro Action as regional head in Mazar-e-Sharif.

"At times it was difficult and dangerous, but we just kept things going," says Dr. Mirsasade. Some of the most difficult times were under the Taliban, whose troops marched into Mazar three times before they finally took control in 1998. "We had to send home all the women who worked with us," he recalls, "and we needed a permit for every trip within our project area." But project work was not brought to a standstill. Houses were built, relief supplies distributed, and irrigation systems repaired. During the great drought, tankers brought millions of litres of drinking water to the villages. "In doing so we helped people stay here and not leave their homes," maintains Dr. Mirsasade. But when the Taliban were driven out of the north by the Americans in the autumn of 2001, "the sky finally opened its floodgates," chuckles Dr. Mirsasade. And then chaos broke out. Offices and depots run by international aid organisations, including those of German Agro Action, were looted.

More humanitarian projects came after the war

But then a new period began. The world showed greater interest in Afghanistan, and all of a sudden there was also more money available for humanitarian projects. "We've expanded a lot in the north and we've changed our agenda," says Dr. Mirsasade. There are agricultural projects to distribute seeds and fertilizer, and roads in the most remote areas are being repaired or built. "We're connecting villages to one another and helping people bring their goods to the provincial capital," he explains. "That has major ramifications."

Another new aspect is the National Solidarity Programme, run in association with the World Bank, which provides the financial backing, and various Kabul-based ministries. "We're empowering communities to chose their own projects and carry them out," explains Dr. Mirsasade. German Agro Action staff go to villages to

Signs of a new era. Within the framework of the National Solidarity Program, women have equal rights to vote at elections for the village's representative body.

find out about local needs and organise elections for the local village representative body. This then decides if a road, school or clinic is needed. German Agro Action arranges contacts and helps with the project planning, but the municipality itself remains responsible. In this way civil society can be jump started and guided towards long-term self-help.

Seizing the chance to rebuild

Dr. Mirsasade is concerned that Afghanistan's rebirth is still threatened by shadows from the past. "Now the coup's over, the warlords are back," he says disparagingly. "The first thing we need is strong central government. The entire nation is awaiting serious, rigorous measures." There are certainly signs of hope, yet still no clarity. "We've now got the chance to rebuild Afghanistan," he says, "but the fundamental changes haven't been carried out yet".



photograph: Cordula Kropke

Competent and courageous… Partners on the ground, like Dr. Abdul Karim Mirsasade, are indispensable for the success of projects.



photographs above and right: Thomas Grabka

Building bridges in Jerghan. German Agro Action is one of the few aid organisations to provide reconstruction assistance in an area where the militia warlords Dostum and Atta are fighting for power.

City-escape: Kabul is booming

Rapid growth in the capital is eclipsing problems in the countryside, where 80% of Afghans live.

A mirrored glass high-rise building looms over a busy crossroads, a symbolic landmark in "Kabulistan". Here the rush-hour drones from early morning to evening as lines of cars spew fumes and clog the streets. There are now 40,000 rickety yellow taxis alone in Kabul. As night falls, fancy neon signs light up every corner. Without them the place would remain dark. Kabul is booming as if it had just been put on the map, and the city has freed itself from its country's earthly shackles. But in the countryside things are still looking gloomy – at night, for sure (after all, there's no electricity) – but even during the day thing's are looking bleak.

International clientele bring money into the city

Kabul's boom, however, is to a large extent artificial. It was primarily triggered off, and is now sustained, by the international troops, humanitarian aid workers, diplomats and businessmen, who came to help others – or help themselves – in the Afghan capital. And, as is always the case all over the world, the hawkers went scuttling after the foreigners. There are now two Thai restaurants in Kabul, not forgetting the Boys-Burger stores, pizza take-aways and a Chinese restaurant, where the speciality alongside dishes number 27 and 45 could well be the waitresses in the slit, silk skirt. And then there's the "Deutsche Hof", whose very German landlord, Gunter Völker, guarantees his guests not only fleshy pork and draught beer, but also an ample serving of "Thuringian cosiness" at the heart of the former fundamentalist stronghold. "We love the euro," says Völker. "We turn away local clientele".

Unfortunately Afghans have to stay outside, where the boom makes its own laws. Otherwise the boom is exclusively for those who have found a job as a driver, translator, office worker or watchman with the foreigner visitors. Such employees are able to benefit directly from the blessing of the dollar or euro, which spurs on the city and, according to estimates by the International Monetary Fund, helped Afghanistan achieve a growth rate of 28% in 2002.

The vague prospect of participating in the new wealth, however, lures more and more people to the capital, where the international peacekeeping force also guarantees relative safety. Refugees returning home from Pakistan or Iran pass through their destroyed villages and head straight to Kabul. Of the approximately 2.5 million refugees who returned over the first two years after the war, 400,000 settled in the capital, where there are now 30,000 beggars. The city population has expanded dramatically to 3 million, rents are exploding and new-found misfortune is rising from the ruins.

For many, however, this still seems to be more appealing than life in the countryside, where 80% of the Afghan population live. The rural populace is just as dependent on aid as the city dwellers. Here war and drought have destroyed the soil, irrigation systems are dilapidated and pastures have been turned into mine fields. At least in the city eight out of ten people have access to medical care. In the countryside that figure is only 17%. The same goes for school education. In that country beyond Kabulistan, deserted villages threaten to become the landmark of Afghanistan. It will only be possible to save the nation if aid reaches the countryside.



Homeless people, street vendors, affluent women in a jewellery store – social contrasts are stark in Kabul.

Despite all the problems, a smile is slowly returning to the face of Afghanistan.

More vegetables for the people! Women tend to their vegetable patches with sickles and rakes.

Vitamins in the back garden

German Agro Action advises farmers how to reap a better harvest.

A glorious blue sky stretches out over the village of Kala Shai. All around the rocky hillside farmsteads cling to the slopes. One thing's for sure: there's no shortage of stones for building houses or to bolster the century-old terraces where wheat, corn, red beans and sometimes even opium poppies grow. The Dare-Noor district in the eastern province of Nangarhar, two hours from Jalalabad over bumpy tracks, is wild, spectacular countryside. "But only the poor stay here," says Wakil Muntazer. "The rich go to the cities".

Muntazer, who once studied Business Management in Cologne and did his doctorate in Vienna, is working to help the 78,000 people in Dare-Noor to get by and stay in their native region. As a local staff member running German Agro Action's "food security programme", he and his colleagues advise farmers about cultivating their fields, explaining the advantages of specific crop varieties, giving tips about working the soil, and organising the distribution of seeds and fertilizer. And local farmers are extremely appreciative of their work.



Nan, the nation's staple bread made of flour and water, is baked in a traditional clay oven. It's available everywhere, though regular vegetables are still not a part of the average family diet.

Passing on lost knowledge

"We're happy that the outside world hasn't forgotten us," says Machmad Abas as he takes a tea break with neighbours in his backyard. Goats, chickens and calves squeeze up against the farmstead walls, struggling to get some shadow. The children – and there are a lot of them – nibble away at biscuits inscribed with the initials of the UN's World Food Programme. Machmad Aba and his family spent eight years as war refugees in Pakistan. He came back three years ago - and found his village a changed place: the fields lay fallow, and much had gone to pot during his time in exile. The new start was tough, he says. "We have a large family and only a bit of land."

all photographs: Cordula Kropke


photograph: Jörg Meier



Distributing seedlings to plant fruit orchards and constructing water reservoir and canals both play an important role in the project and lead to an efficient irrigation system.

German Agro Action staff are now showing farmers how to reap the most from small plots of land – without having to plant drugs. Behind Machmad Abas' yard they've built a small tree nursery for fruit trees, where apricots, peaches, plums and almonds now grow. Over the years many trees had either been chopped down or had withered away in Dare-Noor, but now the place is blossoming again in springtime. In the tree nursery, German Agro Action staff show local farmers how to grow, prune and graft trees. It's a process of passing on knowledge which was lost during their time as refugees. Not far from the village there are fields for demonstrating how to grow corn and vegetables where German Agro Action's agronomists help with the cultivation.

Nutrition is multifaceted

The farmers are learning to help themselves, and the massive wall down at the riverside is proof of this. For over three months stones were blasted out of the rock and cemented together to build the 8.5 meter tall flood wall which now contains the normally tranquil mountain stream when its banks burst after heavy rainfall. Abdul Wali, an engineer from German Agro Action, designed the flood wall, but the farmers built it themselves within the framework of the Food for Work programme. Unskilled workers received 9 kg of wheat a day, and qualified workers 35 kg a day. For this wage they also cleaned out the old canals which irrigate their fields.

The village women have also taken on board a role: kitted out with a packet of seeds they've planted vegetable patches in the yard or have taken over sections of the family pastures to grow radish, spinach or turnips. In the start-off packet they also received the necessary tools: a sickle for weeding, and a rake. Contact has already been made with traders in the bazaar so that they can get a good price for seed when they have to plant again next year. Each packet should cost one dollar.

The project aims to bring greater variety into nutrition and thus avoid deficiency symptoms. This is of particular importance for the children, who before hardly ever ate fruit or vegetables – both foodstuffs which generally had to be purchased and were too expensive. Now the requisite vitamins are growing in the back garden. At the same time the women are offered cooking courses to find out what they can actually do with some of the more unfamiliar vegetables.

So much has been set in motion here in Kala Shai and in other villages under this project, but there's still much to do. The farmer, Machmad Abdul, has a wish-list of things they still need up here at the end of the world: a road, a hospital, furniture and teaching material for schools, for instance. He would like the women to be taught sewing or cheese-making so that they can earn a little extra for the family kitty. They won't become rich – Machmud Abas knows that – but they should have enough to survive on.

photograph: Cordula Kropke



Craggy mountain ranges, idyllic valleys, open plains – many regions of Afghanistan are stunningly beautiful.

Water is life...

...and building canals and wells can help farmers and villagers stay alive.

The view from the chain of hills near the village of Nawabad is like looking at two planets: the farmland in the valley below is lush and green, but the brown steppes uphill are dry and crusty. Nature is erratic in northern Afghanistan, sometimes fertile, sometimes barren – depending on whether people have the know-how to work the land. Without water, life on the brown planet is bleak and inhospitable, but elsewhere there are snatches of the green planet, where wheat or corn, cotton and rice grow. This green planet is the lower lying land in the Aliabad district of the province of Kunduz, which has been irrigated through Chardara's main canal for generations. But time, and above all the turmoil of recent years, has caused considerable damage to the traditional irrigation system. The war and the mines have depopulated the land over the last two and a half decades, and then came the great drought from 1998 to 2001. The harvests of recent years in rain fed land fell between 80% and 100%, and even in the irrigated fields, deficits of 50% were recorded. Now the war is over – at least everybody hopes so – and even the rain has returned as a sign of hope. Sham Soodin, a farmer who has to feed his extended family of 25 people with three hectares of land, looks to the future optimistically. "
The harvests are much better again," he says as he collects brushwood for a new roof on the family home.

Canals are the arteries of life

To secure the farmers' livelihood, German Agro Action is now building a new intake structure where the river Kunduz joins the Chardara canal. A 70 meter wide weir will guarantee that the river maintains a certain water level, even in dry periods, and that enough water will keep flowing into the Chardara canal. The irrigation of 45,000 hectares of exploitable arable land is dependent upon this – and the survival of 30,000 families with a total of 180,000 people. If one calculates the huge investment of 200,000 Euros – financed to 90% by the EU Commission and 10% by German Agro Action – in relation to the surface area or per head, the expenditure is patently worthwhile.

Diverse stipulations were taken into consideration at the planning stage: people living downstream wanted a low weir so that as much water as possible remained in the river; residents near to the Chardara canal wanted a high weir – and plenty of water for their needs. Four local authorities had to be consulted and the governor had to be won over before all the political alliances and interests were finally settled. Then construction work could begin: huge quantities of earth had to be moved, the canal temporarily diverted, and a section of the river drained – a race against time, hindered by the seasons, particularly by the cold winter and the snow which melted in the spring. But in the end, nine to eighteen cubic meters of water per second now flow regularly into the canal. The farmers' future has been secured for years to come.

Parallel to this German Agro Action also built a stabile new intake structure on the Aliabad canal, 35km from the provincial capital of Kunduz. Every spring, following the thaw in the Hindu Kush, the river rises by one and a half meters and the canal intake structure was constantly being washed away and had to be renewed each year.

Irrigation canals are the arteries of Afghanistan – and without a workable irrigation system the land is lost. Approximately 80% of Afghanistan's 28 million inhabitants live in villages and small provincial towns and are thereby dependent on the yield of the land. All in all, 12% of the national territory – a total of 8 million hectares – is cultivated for agricultural production. Before the war 5 million hectares were used, and more than half of that area served as an irrigation system. The rehabilitation and extension of the existing systems is the key to rebuilding Afghanistan. This applies as much to the eastern region of the country as to the north, where crop cultivation in rain fed land was at least possible until the great drought.

The second priority for German Agro Action's national irrigation projects are therefore the eastern provinces of Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar.

photograph: Cordula Kropke

The rehabilitation and extension of existing irrigation systems is the key to rebuilding Afghanistan.

Amongst German Agro Action's water projects between 2002 and 2004, 18 irrigation structures were built and rehabilitated to help increase agricultural production.



photograph: Cordula Kropke

Building irrigation systems can only work with the help of locals. German Agro Action pays them with food in kind.

In the small village of Pashaee in the province of Laghman, where the first satellite dishes have sprouted on a few of the farmers' roofs, the inhabitants have a new marvel to admire: a monumental wall, which attracts hordes of children and a few elders. More than a hundred meters long, it flanks the irrigation canal – a playground for the local ducks – on both sides and passes straight through the village. Workers are putting the last touches to it with their spatulas. In the future, Pashaee will be protected from flooding when water levels rise. As is the case with all of German Agro Action's projects, 50% of the daily wage-paying work is done by local villagers. That way everybody's happy. At least, almost everybody.

Elders want their say

Amongst the elated hubbub, the enthused thumbs-up and children shouting "beautiful, beautiful", an angry old man hits the roof. Machmut Ismail, with his elaborately tied turban, lives right at the back of the village, beyond the mosque, where the wall ends. Now that everything's finished, he also wants to reap the benefits of the new wall. In a loud voice he demands that the workers extend the wall, energetically pointing the way to his home. Gesticulating wildly, he shows the Project Leader how long and how high the wall should be, but his stipulations come too late. The contract was negotiated and sealed with the village elders a long time ago. Obviously the furious Machmut Ismail hadn't been consulted by the representative body. It takes time to calm him down, but in the end he admits that he'll also benefit from the most recent construction. Because, in addition to the wall, a weir is also going to be built at the front and the back of the village, feeding into small canals which, in the future, will also irrigate his fields.

Coming home to the unknown

Foreman Gul wants to rebuild his country.

Khanzad Gul is 31 years old. His blood is Afghan and so are his convictions, but he was forced to live as a war refugee in Pakistan for 23 years following the Soviet invasion. In autumn 2002 he set off home to Kunduz, northern Afghanistan. "This is my country," he says. "That's why I came back."

It was a venture into the unknown, with tangible fears and a hazy feeling of hope. And it was the hope that came through. "On the 12th October – I remember it clearly – I found a job," he recalls. Since then he's been working on the irrigation construction sites run by German Agro Action. As a foreman who qualified as an engineer in Peshawar, Pakistan, he has twelve men under his responsibility.

He's one of the many people returning home who have found employment and a reliable income for their fresh start as part of a German Agro Action project. In the meantime he's brought his family over. He's settled down with his wife and five children, aged between ten years and six months, in the village of Angorbagh. He earns 200 dollars per month. That's a lot in a region where many families have to get by on one dollar a day.



Like many of his countrymen, Khanzad Gul wants one thing above all: a future in his own country.

The fight against diarrhoea and cholera

The water made them ill, but now the farmer, Sher Badur, and his neighbours are getting a new well with clean drinking water.

An ox stoops into a low, hatched barn. The donkey, who usually shares the stall with him, has slipped off to a shadowy spot under a tree. It's a picture of almost biblical peace, yet the sound that accompanies it doesn't quite match: banging, stomping around, rattling machines, clattering metal. The barn, together with the ox and the donkey, form the picturesque backdrop to a building site where four men, covered from beard to foot in mud, are working. A huge hammer drill grinds its way into the ground inch by inch. The mound of damp earth next to the vertical hole piles up by the shovelful. The men reach underground water, the filtered PVC tube is at hand – the new well will soon be ready in Kaklo Badjawor Bar Banda, a small village with a long name in the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar.

For Sher Badur, who attentively follows the construction work, it will change his life. The clamour merely signals the dawn of a new, better world. He's 40 years of age, and his black beard is turning grey. Except for a few years in Pakistan during the Russian invasion, he's lived in this village since he was born. He has seven children and a wife to look after. That's not easy in all this turmoil. "But now," he says, "at least we're going to get clean water which won't make us ill."

Up until now they collected their drinking water from the open canals: the same water they used to irrigate their fields. Sher Badur drank it. His children and the other hundred odd families in their village drank it, too, "ever since we were born," he says. When one of them grew ill, they were taken by donkey cart to see a doctor in Jalalabad. That's more than 30 km away, and people were often ill. Sher Badur puts his hands on his stomach and says, "we always had problems."



photograph: Cordula Kropke

Digging wells is backbreaking work. Sher Badur and the other farmers in his village get stuck in. A fifth of the Afghan population still doesn't have access to clear water.



all photographs: Cordula Kropke

In the future this boy won't have to bale his water out of the open canals where his cattle drink.



Many children die as a result of dirty water. Sher Badur knows what the well means for his seven children.



German Agro Action's current well construction projects guarantee the provision of clean drinking water for around 48,000 Afghans.

Only a quarter of the Afghan population at the most has access to clean drinking water. In the countryside the figure is even less. This results in cholera and other diarrhoea-based illnesses. One in four children die before the age of five – 42% of such deaths are due to dirty drinking water. Building wells saves lives, and German Agro Action has either drilled or dug more than 600 wells since its engagement in Afghanistan began in 1993. 420 will now be added to that figure in eastern and northern Afghanistan.

There is a huge need, and much has to be considered beforehand: the new well has to be built at a publicly accessible, central location which the village womenfolk can also reach. It has to benefit 15 to 25 families within a radius of not more than 500 meters and cannot be situated in front of a mosque, next to a street, or in a bazaar. There should be no threat of contamination for the clean water.

Villagers have to be prepared to work on the construction of the well themselves, taking on board a share of the labour. If everything goes according to plan, a well can be ready within four days, including fitting the hand pump and the concrete foundation. On average a well costs $1,000. If it has to be drilled considerably deeper then it can cost up to $2,000. For the subsequent maintenance, a committee is set up – in keeping with an old tradition in which a so-called "mirab" is elected – to look after the upkeep and spare parts. Sher Badur knows that it's worth it.

Wash your hands, boil your water

How teaching about hygiene in villages raises awareness about the value of clean drinking water.

When 27 year-old Zarghuna from Jalalabad sets out to the villages, she's greeted with open arms and often a blank stare to boot. Each time she gathers a circle of women around her, unpacks a few posters – easily understandable for those who can't read or write – and starts teaching: wash your hands, not just with water but with soap, too; collect water only from the safest wells, or boil it; pay attention to cleanliness – these are the messages she's bringing to the people within the framework of the Hygiene Education programme which takes place wherever German Agro Action have built a well. The women listen attentively, but then the same argument comes time and again: "our fathers drank this water, so we will drink it as well..."

"People don't even know where the illnesses come from," says Zarghuna. "It's very difficult to change their attitude." There's a shortage of knowledge and a lack of awareness, "but slowly things are getting better," declares Zarghuna. She's taught more than a thousand women and has noticed that the men are "pleased and proud their wives are learning something". Zarghuna, who had to break off her studies in Educational Theory in Kabul after the Taliban took power, is also proud of her work with German Agro Action. She's being taught English; she can participate in computer courses; and, above all, she thinks "it's important to help our society".

Five times a week five men accompany the ten women on their rounds around Jalalabad, visiting villages at the same time as the women and gathering the male heads of household around them. The villagers agreed to participate in the Hygiene Education programme when they applied for the grant to build their well. There are six instructional sessions every four weeks. "Changing people's attitudes with regards to hygiene is a slow process," says Hanife Kurt, who leads the project in Jalalabad and Kunduz. "It's more than just a question of building a well. People have to learn how to use clean drinking water, too."



photograph: Cordula Kropke

Explaining hygiene means patient argumentation against tough resistance. Many Afghans continue drinking from canals because they claim the water from the well tastes bad.

Fragile peace

As part of the international peacekeeping force in Kabul, the German army has earned respect and made many friends, but the country at large is still far from stable.



all photographs: Cordula Kropke

"Hi there, ragamuffin!" - badgering German ISAF soldiers is a favourite pastime of Kabul children.



A precarious state of security. The UN and humanitarian organisations have become specific targets for attacks.

The staff sergeant hands out the daily briefing to the Charly section: on the morning's agenda is a patrol through the old Kabul district of Sharara. "We want to make our presence felt," he says. Three "dingos", the Germany army's mine-proof personnel carriers, set off with a jeep and squeeze their way through the narrow shopping alleyways. When they stop at a dusty parking lot, they're surrounded like wildfire. For the children of Kabul the foreign soldiers are still an attraction.

"Hello, mister!" they call and wave. The soldiers wave back saying, "Hi there, ragamuffin!", and the children respond with "Hi there, ragamuffin!", amused by the sound of the words. The German army is part of the international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan to fulfil the UN mandate to help Afghanistan's central government maintain stability. While there, they haven't just won the respect of the people, they've also made friends in Kabul. The children proudly tell the soldiers that they're now going to school, the bazaar traders greet them warmly, and an old man hurries over to assure them that "if you need a hand, we're here day and night."

ISAF concentration on Kabul doesn't safeguard the whole country

In the eyes of many Afghans, Germany has taken on a kind of godfather role to their country ever since the Afghanistan negotiations in Petersberg, Bonn, in December 2001. The German army has provisionally led the ISAF mission, which is now under NATO command, and – with up to 2,700 soldiers – was the largest contingent of the 5,000 man force. The mission's success can be seen in the relative calm in Kabul's streets, but this achievement is far from seamless.



A military escort in Kabul. The capital is an island of relative safety, but the idea that peace would spread into the provinces has turned out to be wrong.

ISAF's concept of concentrating on Kabul didn't work out. Old conflicts have broken out again in the countryside, and the turmoil in the provinces keeps spilling over into the capital. In an average month, Secret Services pass on 60 to 80 warnings of attack to ISAF. "I've stopped counting the missile attacks around our camp," says the German army spokesman, Heinz Günter Polanz. In May 2003 seven German soldiers died when a suicide-bomber blew up their bus. So the peace is more fragile than the good-natured pictures of patrols suggest.

The reason for this is the country's disunity, which is reflected right up to the central government. At the American-led Petersberg conference, Hamid Karsai was nominated as president to satisfy the Pashtun majority. Yet the Pashtuns nonetheless see themselves disadvantaged in the face of the Tajiks from the Pandschir valley, who drove out the Taliban acting almost as US ground troops. This discord leaves its mark on the work of the government in Kabul, but is eclipsed by the power struggle of individual warlords fighting in the regions. Moreover, the Taliban are regrouping in the south and south-east, along the border with Pakistan.

In autumn 2003 the UN Security Council made an overdue amendment of the Petersberg mandate to establish a series of ISAF islands in the provinces. Provincial Reconstruction Teams have been installed in various parts of the country to extend the power of the central government beyond Kabul and facilitate a secure environment for the reconstruction work of the NGOs. The German army chose to be deployed to Kunduz in northern Afghanistan.

Unlike the Balkan conflict, the international community never professed to settle Afghanistan with massive troop deployment. ISAF is explicitly defined as an "International Security Assistance Force", a pure facilitator. The Afghans themselves have to take responsibility for their own country's stability. With this aim in mind, Germany has taken on the task of training police in the capital, while the US is training the military. The development of a multi-ethnic Afghan national army is making only slow progress, and in the vacuum in between, chaos thrives.

Deadly seed

Afghanistan is once again the world's biggest supplier of opium, but farmers profit least from the billion dollar heroin trade based in the Hindu Kush.

The poorest farmers go everywhere by foot, while the poor at least have a donkey. Yet this man arrives astride his steed. Fair enough, the horse has got its work cut out carrying his weight, but his belly only underlines his importance. Here in the village of Qasab, a small rural community not far from the northern provincial capital, Kunduz, people treat the bearded man with the greatest respect. Helpers are standing by as he hoists himself off his horse, and the head of the household invites him into the men's living room, which is fitted out with a carpet and a couple of comfortable cushions. When tea is served, the well-liked man with the turban begins to speak. "No names," he says resolutely. "Do you want them to kill me?" Then he laughs at the top of his voice.

But it's a serious matter. In fact, it's a question of life and death – his life, his neighbours' lives, and the survival of about 200,000 poor farmers in Afghanistan. For the many nameless people far away in the West whose lives are destroyed by their harvest, it's a question of death. And farmers here don't want to see their yield being destroyed, because the opium harvest in the Hindu Kush, and the heroin which is extracted from it, now dominates the world market. Three-quarters of the global consumption is supplied through little plastic bags posted from Afghanistan, including 90% of the European market.

Drugs are prohibited

"We are Mujahideen," says the man, a former soldier in the jihad against the Soviet army, so "we know we shouldn't do it." Drugs are prohibited both by law and by the Qur'an, he knows that as well. And he also knows that drugs are dangerous. "We never did it before," he assures us. "But we all did it this year. We didn't have any other choice."

He and his neighbours have just sown the poppy seeds. In the spring, the meadows will blossom in a radiant sea of red, and shortly after the farmers of Qasab will go out to their fields – just like their neighbours and countrymen in southern and eastern Afghanistan – and make incisions into the green pods with a small knife to secrete a milky white sap which they will dry in the sun and press into grimy brown blocks. Then the brokers will come and exchange the opium for a bundle of money.

Record harvests see massive turnover

The business done on the back of this produce generates a billion dollar turnover. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Vienna estimates the Afghan opium harvest in 2003 to have been around 3,600 tons. Dissolved in boiled water and mixed together with acetic acid it produces 360 tons of pure heroin with a world market value of $25 billion. A maximum of 10% of this money stays in Afghanistan, which the UN estimates at being around $2.3 billion – still amazingly half of Afghanistan's GNP. Yet farmers, the first and weakest link in the chain, only ever see 1% of the proceeds.

It's always other people who make the big bucks: the fat-cat dealers in the West; the smugglers who shift the goods via various routes through Tajikistan, Iran or Pakistan; and the wholesalers at home who force the farmers into dependence using old feudal methods. They supply seeds and fertilizer, and credit to survive until the harvest – and in the end they poach the profits. The provincial warlords in war-torn Afghanistan are always in on the game. They're not just warlords, they're drug lords too, and their connections allegedly reach as far as central government in Kabul. The people growing rich on narcotics aren't interested in political stability. That would be bad for business.

photographs: Jörg Meier

Business blooms in Afghanistan's poppy fields. In 2003 three-quarters of the world's opium was produced here.

The green poppy pod is cut with a knife to secrete the white sap, which is the[illegible] dried and pressed into brown bloc[illegible]


photograph: Cordula Kropke

Kunduz's city gate. Many farmers in this province see the cultivation of opium as their only chance of survival.

Since the 1990s all the warring factions in Afghanistan have been filling their coffers with drug money. Under the Taliban, otherwise infamous for their stringent laws, a record harvest was produced in 1999 consisting of 4,600 tons of opium. Only shortly before their reign was over did the men around Mullah Omar take into account the obligations of their faith and ban the cultivation of poppies. In 2001 opium production was down at only 185 tons, but the fall of the Taliban and the outbreak of inter-fighting have boosted business again. The next harvest could break all records.

A powerless government

Farmers from Qasab see this as a blessing. Their plots of land are hardly bountiful – an average Afghan farming family only has half a hectare for cultivation – and the price of opium beats everything else on the market. "For a kilogram of opium we'd have to grow 3,500kg of wheat," they've calculated. No one's interested in wheat here anymore. Everyone just talks about poppies. They recently sent a delegation to the governor of Kunduz to safeguard their harvest. Of course, their spokesman, the imposing rider, went with them. "If the police come and destroy the harvest, then we'll have to go back to Pakistan or Iran as refugees," they told the governor. The governor promised to "talk to Kabul about it."

But the truth is the governor doesn't seem to want to talk about it at all. Abdul Latif Ibrahimi sits in his office and tries to wriggle out of it, because he knows he can't win. "I understand the farmers' problems," he says. "When their children are sick, they have to go to the doctor. That's expensive, so they grow poppies." That's one side of the story, but on the other hand he says he would resort to force if necessary. "We don't want it to get that far, but if we have to, we'll destroy their fields." Two doors further down, however, his deputy, Said Daud Hashimi, admits that it's far too late for that. "We burned fields last year and put some farmers in jail," he says. "But now we're not talking about one or two farmers. Everybody wants to grow poppies in Kunduz now."

So the buck gets passed to Kabul, but central government seems just as helpless. Although President Hamid Karsai has prohibited the cultivation of poppies and threatened to plough up or burn every field of it, he also knows this won't be possible. His government has requested more international help to combat the narcotics trade. His finance minister, Ashraf Ghani, has sent the international community a clear warning saying that Afghanistan could degenerate into a "mafia drug state". But the answer has been silence.

There's no money for adequate substitution programmes. ISAF troops in the provinces don't want to get involved in the dark and dangerous narcotics business, and before they sent the Federal Army to Kunduz, the German parliament made it clear that combating drugs was not part of their mandate. The Americans have even had to put up with accusations that they've been supporting the trade. In their hunt for terrorists in Afghanistan they made a pact with the regional warlords who pull the strings of the narcotics trade. And as long as they hold the strings, an opium-free future looks bleak.

Where hope is made

The cogs haven't started turning yet, but the factory manager has big plans.



photograph Cordula Kropke

Manager Araianpoor won't be able to fulfil his visions without help.

Mohammed Aslan Araianpoor is a manager with all the trimmings: a compelling voice, a charismatic presence and a head full of ideas. He's got a satellite cell phone, which never leaves his hand, and a throng of employees, who follow him every-where he goes, and – not forgetting – he's got a factory, too. His company is called "Spinzar" and it would be impossible to imagine the northern provincial capital of Kunduz without it. As we take a tour around its dusty streets, the driver points out houses and buildings, estates and open areas – and they all belong to Spinzar. The factory once made a big impact on the city. It's everywhere. Above all, as a memory.

The glory days were decades ago

The good old days are long since gone, and between the glory years and present-day reality lie 23 years of war – a war that left behind deep scars in the city, amongst its people, and also in the factory. None of the cogs are turning in this forlorn factory site at the end of the arterial road, where in 1978 more than 2,200 employees earned their daily bread either in the cotton processing plant, the furniture factory, or the soap or soup works. Today shattered window panes and bullet holes in the walls bear witness to the heavy fighting. Here Afghanistan's condition is captured in a burning glass: even with the end of the war little has been accomplished for the people; the place is derelict like the rest of the country; there's no work and no livelihood; but there's still a glimmer of hope. In the middle of all the despair a manager is radiating a contagious confidence. "We have big plans," he says. "We want to reopen all the sections."

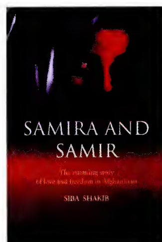
Nowadays the state-owned company employs just 450 people, amongst them 15 women, explains Araianpoor, but he hopes that figure will eventually rise to more than 5,000. Araianpoor doesn't just wax lyrical about the blooming prospects, he puts them into practice, too: in the middle of the factory premises there's a guesthouse with a rose garden and a fountain illuminated by colourful neon lights. "I built that in 20 days," says Araianpoor. A lemon orchard has also been lovingly planted where geraniums blossom between the trees. But what about the production line? Not a chance!

The employees are currently fully occupied with cleaning and maintenance work. They sweep the debris onto the open spaces – not with a broom, but with broken-off branches – and in the factory halls they're scrubbing down and tinkering with machinery which would probably be a prize item in an industrial museum in Germany. In the cotton processing plant is a monstrous contraption with the faded label: "Harburger Iron and Bronze works plc, Germany". The electrical switchgear is made by Siemens, and there's a faded yellow sign hanging from a crane with the warning in German: "unnützer Aufenthalt im Arbeitsbereich verboten" (no lingering in the work area). On average the machines are 40 to 50 years old, and they nearly all come from Germany.

Everything German is very popular here. "The Germans are our friends," says Araianpoor, something he's experienced first-hand time and again. He used to be a teacher and then became headmaster of the German-funded Amani school in Kabul. He took part in a German management course to prepare him for the post in Kunduz where, in summer 2003, he replaced a businesslike but inexperienced Mujahideen commander. "I can thank the Germans that I have the chance to run this factory," he says. But he's not just going to have to run it, he's going to have to make it work. And for that he's going to need a little help.

Samira and Samir

If you have a secret, take it, carry it to the Hindu Kush and lay it beneath a stone.



So listen, says Samira and begins.

The king with the lovely name of Bahrame Gour is a good hunter. On a peaceful day that God gives him he goes hunting. He is accompanied by his men, his vassals and his slaves, his vizier and a girl with a beautiful face and the body of a gazelle. Her silky, shining hair is long, her dark almond eyes are two jewels, her skin is as tender as a peach. The girl moves with the grace of a wild cat, her singing makes the birds fall silent. She plays a little harp. The melody that she draws from her instrument brings joy to the hearts of all who hear it.

The king looks at her and says, I admire your voice and the skill with which you play your instrument. Tell me, beautiful girl, do you also admire my strength and my courage?

The girl keeps silent, and her silence pierces the king's heart like an arrow.

The king is very unhappy, and asks, what must your lord and master do to win your admiration for his courage and his strength?

At that moment a deer appears.

The girl says, if you possess enough strength to pin the foot of this animal to its head, then you will have my admiration.

The king throws a marble at the animal's ear. When it scratches its ear with its foot, the king fires his arrow and hits. Now do I have your admiration for my strength and might?

Your deeds deserve no admiration, she says. If a person practises the same thing over and over again, his success is guaranteed. Your success is not the result of your strength and courage, but the result of practice and experience.

The girl's brazenness so infuriates the king that he orders his vizier to take her away and kill her. The girl persuades the vizier to spare her life and take her to his own palace, far from the king. The girl has a plan. She sees a newborn calf, puts it over her shoulder and carries it up the sixty steps to the entrance of the palace. She does that every day that God gives her. And even when the calf is a fully grown cow, the beautiful girl still carries it up the sixty steps to the palace.

In that way the girl becomes stronger and stronger, and more and more beautiful. Finally she gives the vizier her earrings and her jewellery, asks him to buy meat, fruit, nuts and other such things and invite the king. The vizier undertakes to pay for the meal himself, spreads out his most precious carpets at the top of the sixty steps, prepares a rich meal and asks the king to be his guest.

The king climbs up the sixty steps and says, vizier, you have built yourself a fine palace, but when you are old, how will you climb these exhausting steps?

The vizier says, my king, whether I can climb these steps lies in the hands of God, but allow me to show you something.

The girl has put on her finest clothes and hidden her face beneath a scarf. She puts the cow over her shoulder, climbs the steps, sets the cow down and says, you have seen it, my king, I have carried this cow up sixty steps with my own strength. Tell me now, my king and master, is there a man with strength enough to carry the cow back down again?

That is not a question of strength, says the king. You must have carried the cow up the steps since it was a small, light calf. So you can still do it today, because it is a matter of experience and practice.

But when you pinned an animal's foot to its head with your arrow, you said it was the result of your strength and your courage. Now I have proved to you that you were wrong. The young woman takes off her scarf and shows the king her face.

The king recognises her, is glad that she is alive and says, if this house has become your prison, then I ask your forgiveness. He rewards his vizier handsomely, takes the young woman away and marries her.

Did they live happily ever after? asks Bashir.
They did, says Samira.

Samira & Samir, page 175 – 177

all photographs: Cordula Kropke

Around 2.5 million Kutchi nomads have been living in the ancestral pastoral land of Afghanistan for centuries. Many of them have fallen victim of mines, hostilities and plundering.

Feelings into pictures

From Kabul to the Berlin Film Festival: how the young filmmaker, Abdull Wali Hamdard, wants to portray reality.



photograph: Cordula Kropke

Abdull Wali Hamdard hopes that his film can make the jump to the international circuit and that audiences will be just as impressed as they were by "Osama", the film by Sedigh Barnak, his tutor.

The never-ending rush hour in Kabul. Traffic rages. A lone figure is trying to convince the hordes of pedestrians to use the underpass to cross the street for safety reasons. The pedestrians refuse. They get angry and aggressive. It's an utterly futile undertaking – and yet crowned with success. Because the scene in the rush hour, absurdly larger-than-life and cut to the pumping rhythms of James Brown, comes from a short film which the young Afghan filmmaker, Abdull Wali Hamdard, wants to present at the Berlin Film Festival.

The 24 year-old, who returned from exile in Pakistan in 2002, is just about getting to know the home that had become so foreign to him. Yet if he's lucky, the whole world will soon be his oyster. As a student of the well-known Afghan filmmaker, Sedigh Barmak, whose film "Osama" won a prize at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival, Wali drew the attention of the Goethe Institute in Kabul. Its cultural experts praised his style as being "in the best tradition of Afghan Educational Films," and he's been invited to partake in workshops there. Now the Goethe Institute are helping him with his application for the Berlin Film Festival.

Making films that have something to say

For Wali a dream has come true. As a child he was mad about films, above all, American ones. "When I watch them, I get completely involved. I need complete peace and quiet," he says. He actually intended to study engineering in Kabul, but then he succumbed to his passion. Today he works at Afghan Film, an organisation which produces news, documentaries and fiction films commissioned by the Ministry of Culture. He wants to "make films that have something to say. We can express feelings in images which we can't convey in words," he says.

He's an unassuming man, but inside he's burning with ambition and is thirsty for action. And like his hunger for film, the cultural scene throughout Kabul has woken to a new life after surviving the ice-age under the Taliban, where everything pleasurable was forbidden. Kabul had been a city of silence, without music, without dance, without theatre – and without film.

In a secluded corner of the grounds of Afghan Film, Wali shows us the spot where the Taliban burned movies after they invaded Kabul. "First of all they burned foreign films," he recounts. "Then the Afghan ones." The flames reached high into the sky, and the smoke created by the celluloid was so strong that burning in the city centre had to be stopped. A total of 15 truckloads full of film reels were carted out of Kabul and thrown onto a big pyre, a sacrilege which even today boils young Wali's blood.

He plans to make the every day terror under the Taliban the main focus of his first feature film. He recalls how he occasionally used to sneak back to his homeland from his foreign exile – though without the obligatory beard. This meant he could only leave his relative's home in secret. "I witnessed many tragedies," he says, "and I would like to put a few of these tragic fates into pictures". The film is conceived mainly for a foreign public. He believes "people should know how people in Afghanistan were the victims of stringent laws".

The only problem is financing it. He estimates he'll need $10,000, but he knows he can't expect any funding from the government. "They need all their money to rebuild houses and roads," he says – a fact which for Wali is hard but true.



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• Maps of Afghanistan
www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/afghanistan.html

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